The Fourth Church Pulpit

BUT DO NOT THOU FORGET ME

[Including comments on the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)]

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John M. Buchanan

Long View

Rest assured, Presbyterians,
that whatever we do here, today,
this world will - somehow - manage
to survive, whatever of wisdom
or of folly we solemnly unleash
upon creation, lovers still
will lie abed, and infants,
persistent, will perish from want
of food, of caresses, of those
who will keep faith with that One
who turned water, toppled tables,
and touches one and all with
the lingering prospect of life.

J. Barrie Shepherd
Albuquerque, N.M.
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FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Matthew 13:24-30
Genesis 28:10-19

" ... I am with you and will keep you wherever you go ..."
Genesis 28:18 (NRSV)

On our refrigerator door, amidst a wonderful collage of family memorabilia, at eye level so that I see it the first thing in the morning every day of my life as I'm reaching for the orange juice, is a prayer. It is my favorite. It is the one prayer I pray every single day, and it has come to mean a lot to me — particularly these days.

It is written in old English script and attributed to a Sir Jacob Assley, who prayed it before the Battle of Newbury. Sir Jacob prayed:

> Lord
> I shall be
> verie busie
> this day. I
> may forget
> Thee but doe
> not Thou
> forget me.

I love that prayer because of its remarkable affirmation of God's presence in the midst of human life at its most human. I love it because it contains the basic hopefulness of our religion; namely that there is nowhere you and I can go that is God-forsaken, not even those places where human life is profane and violent and tragic. I love the promise that God is not dependent on my attentiveness. I love that prayer because, not unlike you, I am, and for the foreseeable future, will be "verie busie": not unlike you, so very busy that you and I don't live with a constant minute-by-minute awareness of God as a presence, a companion.

On the contrary, we are so busy with the battles of Newbury in our lives that we do forget God, forget everything except the demands of the minute. And so, I love the prayer that reminds me that even though I may be so busy that I have momentarily forgotten God, God has not forgotten me — and the suggestion, at least, that it is in those very times and places and experiences that we forget God, that God is most immediately present to us and involved in our lives.

The prevailing, operative assumption is that God is remote, not immediately involved, certainly not involved in human life at its most human: maybe life at its most sublime, maybe listening to great music, admiring a sunset, pondering the beauty of a flower, but not selling bonds, changing a diaper, arguing a case, fighting a battle. The prevailing assumption is that to be religious you have to take a few steps back from that sort of thing: find a place in which to be religious. To get in touch with God you have to be in a different place, behave differently, be different.

What happens when you proceed with those assumptions is that religion becomes idiosyncratic, odd in an appealing sort of way, peculiar and, soon, an end in itself, having less and less to do with actual human life, which is why so many people find religion boring. In fact, you could make the argument, and some do, that the longer a religious tradition exists without reformation or revolution, the more it becomes an end in itself and the further it travels from the actualities of life as its adherents are trying to live it.

Actually the religious tradition — our religious tradition — the Judeo/Christian tradition takes the exact opposite tack. At its most basic level, in the formative stories on which our religion rests, the assertion is made that God is not only not remote, but surprisingly and unexpectedly close at hand, that human life in all its moments and experiences is lived out in the presence of God, and that the purpose of religion is to remind us of that amazing fact, that radical involvement of God in human life.

In many ways, the best of those stories is Jacob's. Jacob is no saint. Or at least Jacob redefines "saint" in a way accessible to most of us. He is basically a greedy, self-serving person. You recall the story, I'm sure. Jacob tricks his twin brother out of his birthright. And that's only the beginning. With his mother's assistance, Jacob then deceives his father Isaac, who is old and blind; tricks him into thinking that he, Jacob, is actually Esau, tricks him into granting a blessing — the mantle of leadership, the inheritance — to him instead of Esau to whom it rightfully belonged.

It's not pretty. When he discovers what has happened, Esau is upset. With wonderful literary restraint the Genesis writer says "Now Esau hated his brother": planned to kill him, in fact, the day their father Isaac died.

His mother, Rebecca, intercedes and helps Jacob get away. And that's the situation ... Jacob on the run, in exile, banished from home, family, community, running away from all that is precious and good and meaningful, utterly alone, full of guilt and, of course, scared to death.

On the first night out it happens: a dream about God and the promise, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you ..."

God comes to Jacob, promises never to abandon Jacob. Not when Jacob is being religious, doing religious things, worshipping, saying his prayers, but precisely when Jacob is engaged busily in trying to save his own skin, protect his own life. God comes to a man in self-imposed exile and isolation, a man caught in a kind of profound loneliness. God comes to Jacob entirely unexpectedly and even though Jacob remains a schemer, he can never forget God or the promise that God will be with him wherever he goes and will keep him as long as he lives.

We live in what has been called a radically secular era, a time when we seem more aware of God's absence than God's presence, a time when we ask daily the fundamental theological question, where is God in all of this? Has God forgotten us, abandoned us? Or, in fact, has the radical secularism of the day merely confirmed that we are ultimately alone, that there is no one there?

And along side our radical secularity, its counterpoint, there emerges a deep and intense spiritual hunger, a longing. Ironic. At the very moment of profound secularism, the culture can't seem to get enough of spirituality. People who wouldn't think of going to church spend lots of time and money getting in touch with their own souls. Spirituality has become the mantra for the late 90s.

The story of Jacob makes the astonishing suggestion that God takes the initiative, that we live out our lives in God's presence, and He comes to us in unexpected times and places and that faith is simply our grateful response to God's unexpected and gracious intrusion into our lives.

"Where can I go from your spirit?" the Psalmist asked. "Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there... If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your ... hand shall hold me fast." (Psalm 139:7-11)

There is nowhere you can go that God is not there with you. There is no situation so secular that God is not present. There is nowhere you can be that God cannot find you.

I went to Alabama and North Carolina last week on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to the sites of several burned and destroyed Black churches, to talk with the pastors and people, to learn what I could and to assure them of the concern and solidarity of Presbyterians from all over the country. In the outskirts of Charlotte, we met with the Reverend Larry Hill and a few of his people at the Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church which lost its beautiful old sanctuary building to an arsonist.

After we saw the site which is a pile of burned rubble, Larry showed us a picture. I was struck by the beauty of the old clapboard building and its significance for the people, many of whom were baptized and married in it. The congregation has a functional new brick building, but the old sanctuary was precious to them and was the soul of their community of faith.

You might think that for African Americans — who weren't even allowed to have their own churches until after the Civil War — that this wave of arson, burning away the very heart of their community, would be the ultimate insult, the source of anger or at least profound discouragement.

To the contrary, Mr. Hill was upbeat. "We were talking about ways to increase our visibility in the community as an evangelism strategy," he said. "We seem to have accomplished our objective."

He told about how the fire had brought the black and white community together, about the thousands of letters and telephone calls he has received, told about white neighbors driving to the site, getting out to look around and openly weeping, told about white people now attending worship, about a couple who had flown from Germany — where houses of worship were burned a generation ago — to be in worship with the congregation on Sunday morning.

He said, and his people nodded, "We don't believe for a moment that God provoked this fire but we do believe God can use it and we intend to turn it into a glorious victory for Jesus Christ."

That's the word our faith whispers — even in the most radically secular moments, when we are alone, abandoned, when we have lost all, when all looks dark. The holiest of holies for Christians is not a gorgeous cathedral or even a beautiful mountaintop. Our holiest place is a hill outside an ancient city which served as garbage dump and place of execution. Our most God-filled event is an act of sacrificial love, a self-giving so profound that we cannot even understand it. Our good news is of a love so deep, so strong, so immortal, that even death does not defeat it.

"Even the darkness is not dark to you: the night is bright as the day, darkness is as light to you."

Those are the words I thought of when I heard the news of TWA flight 800 this week. Those are the words I need as I continue to ponder the senseless violence, the terrible tragedy.

"Even the darkness is not dark to you ..."

That is the good news. There is nowhere we can go that God is not present. God will come into our lives, on God's initiative, at times and places that are sometimes startling and usually unexpected ... even and particularly in our preoccupations, and our frantic, distracted busyness.

As Sir Jacob prayed —

Lord
I shall be
verie busie
this day. I
may forget
Thee but doe
not Thou
forget me.

Amen.